DEALING WITH YOUR
DIFFICULT
SON- OR DAUGHTER-IN-LAW
The Do's and Don'ts

Transcription of Teleseminar
By Dr. Joshua Coleman
Let’s begin. We’re starting our third teleseminar on dealing with difficult daughters-in-law and sons-in-law and the dos and don’ts.

This is a very common problem that people either become estranged or an estrangement becomes perpetuated as a result of a relationship with a daughter or son-in-law.

Everybody who’s going through an estrangement feels like they’re the only ones. They feel very alone and isolated and like there must be something terribly wrong with them. How come none of their friends are going through this? I just want you to all know that there are thousands of people
going through this and over 100 people on this call.

I have people on the call today from Israel, Australia, Croatia and the UK, as well as practically every state in the United States.

Let’s get into the topic of dealing with your difficult son-in-law and daughter-in-law. From my perspective there’s a continuum of relating to one’s in-laws that goes from normal, expectable conflict and disruptions to those which are less expectable and more problematic, even dysfunctional and pathological.

Probably the majority of you are dealing with some that are more on the pathological side in terms of the in-laws even though they may have started out being triggered by more normal and expectable incidents.
To be the most useful to you it’s important for us to look at it from three different angles: from your angle as a parent, from the angle of your estranged child, and from the perspective of the person that they’re married to or cohabiting with.

If we start from your perspective, I know that some of your children have gotten married or had children without sending you a notice. You read it in the paper or heard about it from a friend. It’s not only heartbreaking but humiliating to not know it and be exposed to it in this way.

Many of you who have been very dedicated parents and feel very ripped off, heartbroken and enraged. I can understand and relate to any of those feelings. They’re all very valid feelings. We’ll talk about that particularly in the next seminar when we talk about those of you who have no contact and are
wondering about whether to keep trying or just give up.

For some of you I know it has been many years. When a kid does cut a parent off from a wedding or the birth of a child they’re drawing a pretty serious line in the sand. It’s reasonable for a parent to wonder, “Are they clearly saying that there’s no more chance, or is there something here left to work on?”

Let’s assume that it didn’t start that way, that this is something that has evolved over time. From a parent’s perspective, when our kids get married or become serious about somebody we have a number of concerns, whether they’re voiced or not.

One of them is, “Is the person that my kid is getting serious about going to be respectful or nice to me? Will they like us? How will his or her parents treat us? Will we become less of a priority than the spouse’s parents?”
I bet most, if not all of you would probably say yes to that if you’re dealing with an estrangement that’s related to a daughter or son-in-law.

“How do we handle our negative reactions to our future daughter or son-in-law? Did my kid marry the wrong person?” Since we are older, as parents we often have pretty good ideas about whether or not our kid is about to get in bed with somebody who may well take their life over a cliff.

I hear from many parents that it was really an act of their warning their kid that, “Maybe because of the fact that your husband-to-be is a former felon and this is his fifth marriage and he’s still dealing drugs, that’s not such a good choice.” Even that level of questioning triggered the child getting upset, mad and defensive and rushing into the arms of the other person.
As you can see, there’s plenty of potential for conflict and for a parent to step on somebody’s toes even in a normal, pre-estranged situation. Whenever you begin to bring two different families you’re bringing two different tribes or cultures together.

It increases the chance for conflict, potential engagement, disruption and hurt feelings because you’re really bringing together cultures that sometimes can’t relate to each other even if they’re similar in terms of class, religion or ethnicity.

Moving on to look at it from the child’s perspective, I really want to emphasize that one of the important things to consider in dealing with estrangement is the ongoing role that your child’s expression of individuality, separateness and identity can have.
Nowhere is this more true than when our kids decide who to marry or couple with because the act of choosing a partner is inherently an act of personal expression.

What could be more personal of an act of expression than saying, “This is who I love. This is who I don’t. I like this kind of woman or man. This person speaks to my taste. I don’t like these qualities. I like these”? It’s probably the single most important act of personal expression and choice that people make.

In terms of the family system, it also brings into the open the following questions for the young adult. “Will my parents like or dislike this person I’m now in love with and thinking about marrying or married? How will I feel about it?

“What will I do about it if they don’t like them? What will this mean to me? Will this
person like or dislike my parents? How will I feel about that, and what I will do about that if they don’t like them? What will that mean to me?

“Are they similar to my parents in terms of religion, ethnicity, class or culture? Are they really different? Are they completely opposite and have little to nothing in common with them and really coming from these completely different worlds?”

Early on the seeds of conflict and estrangement may be sown when your child first falls in love with somebody or decides to couple with a person who may be in their lives forever. For example, when first dating the adult child may ask the parent what they think about the person that they’re dating.

If the parent raises some reasonable question, like, “I think the fact that they have a criminal record is something you
should maybe pay attention to. Do you think the fact that they really have no way to support themselves is something that’s important?” the child who is not fully developed with their own sense of identity and individuality may wrongly believe that the parent is questioning their taste and judgment and therefore rush into the arms of the other person as a way to express a kind of rebellious independence.

In other words, because it steps on the toes of their ability to choose for themselves they may feel obligated to embrace the other person more to reassure themselves that they get to decide at that point than because they’re really clear that they’ve just met Mr. or Mrs. Right.

I really want to emphasize the role and importance of the child doing some form of personal expression, demonstrating to you
and the world that they’re own person and they can make their own choices. In the majority of estrangements that’s in there. In some cases it’s the primary engine. In others it’s more secondary, but it’s always in there in some form.

If your child, for example, says in some form, “Screw you. I’m going to choose who I want,” it’s really like the teenager who would rather shoot himself in the foot by getting bad grades in order to remind himself and everybody else that it’s his foot to shoot. He doesn’t see in the rebellion that he’s doing something that’s inherently self-destructive.

Remember that this kind of rebellious independence that I’m seeing may get extended out even into the 30s or later, depending on the overall maturation level of the child.
The more immature your kid, the more undeveloped they are, the less confidence they have, the less they’ve achieved in their life, and the less they can look to themselves and say, “I’m a fully-functioning adult. I don’t need mom or dad. I really know who I am,” the more vulnerable they are to having to push up against you really hard to prove themselves.

Let’s look at the view from the perspective of the son or daughter-in-law. I’m sure right now you’re thinking, “Dr. Coleman, no offense, but I really couldn’t give a damn what this looks like from the perspective of my son or daughter-in-law. You can just skip forward to the next part. I’m so furious at them I could hire a hit man right about now.”

I don’t blame you, but there’s a saying, “Keep your friends close and your enemies
closer.” Nowhere is that more true than if you’re dealing with a son or daughter-in-law who is key to your child staying estranged from you.

The more you understand about them and their psychology, the more you get them. You don’t have to like them. You have to understand them. If you don’t, you’re screwed. The more you can do that, the better off you’re going to be.

Let’s start looking at it from the normal, expectable conflicts that often happen in families, even in a healthy son or daughter-in-law. It may have started with concerns about how things will go with their future in-laws and have the following concerns.

“Are these people going to like me? Will they be too busy and intrusive? Will my partner prioritize their needs over mine?”

That’s hugely important, particularly in
regards to daughters-in-law. I’m going to come back to that. “Will they tell me how to parent or keep my house? Will they tell me how to treat their adult child that I’m married to or marrying?”

The family history of the daughter or son-in-law is also hugely important. Basically the way to think about it is that whatever their issues with their own parents, there’s a good chance that they’re going to have them with you.

If they felt over-controlled by their own parents, there’s a good chance they’re going to view you as being overly controlling. If they felt rejected, devalued and abandoned by their parents they may view you as that way, completely react to something that you do or say, and convince your child that you as parents are much more critical and rejecting than that child realizes.
If estranged from their own parents, they’re much more likely to push your child in that direction. You see how this works. When your kid marries somebody they’re not only marrying that particular person. They’re also marrying the psychology of that person and the family relationships that have been built up over the years in that person’s unconscious.

They’re marrying that person’s whole relationship to other people and the world. They’re marrying that person’s sensitivities, vulnerabilities, and the ways that they’re immature, unresolved, undeveloped, problematic or even unfortunately, as many of you know, psychologically disturbed.

The more that we as parents understand these things, the better we’re able to navigate the often treacherous terrain of having to deal with somebody who
sometimes has a knife to our kid’s throat, saying, “Choose between your parents or me. You don’t get to have both.”

Often when a baby arrives there’s an increase in anxiety on the part of the son or daughter-in-law, which often leads to stress. Estrangements often occurs once there’s a pregnancy or a baby.

Many of you have written to me, and I’ve talked to many of you who said once there was a pregnancy or the baby came along that’s when all hell broke loose.

That’s when you started getting limits set on you about how often you can visit, how you have to behave when you visit, how you’re going to handle the baby, what their expectations of you are, what you can do and what you can’t do.
I know tragically some of you aren’t even invited to be around the child. You’re not even told about the baby until you hear it from somebody else.

This dynamic is particularly true in the situation with the daughter-in-law. The daughter-in-law may worry that the adult child will allow the parents to interfere with parenting and her authority in the household.

Many women worry that they’re going to get somehow diminished in the household or family system and that they won’t be able to say, “This is my house and I get to run it the way that I want.” She’s worried that she won’t have the right to set limits or boundaries to determine how she wants to raise her child or children.

She may be particularly reactive to any comment made by either parent and thereby put your child into a loyalty bind where he
or she feels torn between the parents and the spouse.

From my experience these dynamics may be especially true in those homes where the adult child, particularly sons, were very close to the parents. In those situations the daughter-in-law may be especially worried that the son will defer to the parents rather than her. This may cause her to exaggerate complaints, such as, “I don’t like how your mom holds the baby or bottle,” or that kind of thing.

It happens in plenty of cases with the sons-in-law. I’m not saying 90% of the time this is a daughter-in-law issue. Those of you who are dealing with problematic sons-in-law know that’s not true.

But, I think there’s something about the daughter-in-law having the baby, being pregnant which may cause her to really
elevate these demands on the part of her in-laws and the adult child.

This plays into the autonomy issue for the adult child. It may get really locked in place for those children who were close and amiable with their parents because they may not actually know how to create a healthy boundary between themselves and their parents.

Last week we talked about the fact that four decades ago the vast majority of youth had achieved adulthood in their early to mid-20s, as measured by steady work, marriage and kids. These days it takes a lot longer.

As a result, the definition of “adult” has become much more psychological and less objective. In other words, their compass has become far more how they feel rather than what they do.
Right or wrong, we as parents are often the most important way that adult children test out who they are on the world. Rejecting, criticizing or distancing one’s self from a parent is a way to remind themselves that they’ve arrived into adulthood and they don’t need anyone to take care of them anymore.

In the past, kids could take that reading by saying, “I’m an adult. I know that because I have my own children, a career and I bought my own house.” People aren’t doing that these days until their late 20s and 30s.

That’s why there’s rebellious pushing back and negative devaluing of parents that I’m seeing so much of in my practice and in my work with estranged parents. I believe it’s strongly a phenomenon of adulthood being pushed out later and later because the ways
that we used to establish adulthood have been changed.

Sometimes our children don’t know any other way to prove to themselves that they’re their own person other than to do things that they know the parents will object to similar to an adolescent rebellion.

Keeping that model in mind, the daughter or son-in-law can become a good engine for that feeling of, “I’m my own person. This is my own family. Nobody’s going to tell me what to do or how to do it,” especially when a baby arrives.

When our adult children become parents they’ve arrived into territory that we no longer can uniquely claim as ours. If there’s anything that symbolizes the arrival into adulthood and the displacement of the parent as having a unique role, it’s becoming a parent yourself.
Once that occurs, you’re doing things that your parent can no longer uniquely claim the ultimate authority on. Often adult children become very demanding and difficult around the parent around just this issue.

These are things that happen somewhat commonly. There are also levels of dysfunction in terms of the kind of person that our child may choose to couple with.

In cultures where there are arranged marriages, one of the interesting things is that those marriages tend to actually have higher levels of satisfaction in part because they’re made because the parents of both sides get together and make sure that they like the other parents and that it’s an appropriate match for the kid. They actually have some say over it.

They also have more laws against divorce typically in those cultures, but their marital
satisfaction is higher than it is in the United States. We don’t have that power here. We haven’t had that power where parents got to choose or decide who our kids married since probably the mid-18th century or so.

As a result, our kids can make some terrible choices. We’re damned as a result of it.

Your child may have married somebody who’s a lot stronger than they are. Your kid may be this sweet, happy-go-lucky kid and married a bulldozer, somebody who’s going to say, “This is how we’re doing it. This is when your parents can come over or not. I don’t like your parents or how you are when they’re around, so too bad. Choose me or them.”

They may have very rigid ideas about family and how things should be done, even if they’re not necessarily mentally ill. They
may come from a family that’s more closed and view the new in-laws as intruders.

I’ve talked to a lot of estranged parents where the in-laws are almost like a cult in terms of their desire to exclude the other parents from anything. They welcome your kid into the family, but then they close the walls around them and keep the barriers up.

It’s very hard to get at the child because the walls go up, and your kid gets pulled into that. This may be true in families that are not necessarily diagnosable but who are able to create a lot of pain and chaos nonetheless.

On the other hand, some sons and daughters-in-law come from very dysfunctional families. They can project onto you all of their unresolved conflicts that they’ve felt with their own families.
Somebody who was abused or controlled by their parents when they were growing up may come to wrongly view you that way and make your kid miserable if he or she tries to stay close to you or posits a different interpretation of who you are.

This view of you as being like their parents, which is very common, may cause them to completely overreact to you and take personally interactions that were well intended on your part, or if you did step in it or say something that was careless or thoughtless that would be considered annoying but forgivable in another family, this person latches onto it.

They don’t let it go. They make it a gripe and it becomes a rallying cry to the estranged child that you’re toxic, difficult, troubled, disturbed and how they don’t see it. The fact that they don’t see it means that
they’re just a patsy. A lot of these estranged sons and daughters-in-law will completely humiliate the adult child for wanting to be close to the parent.

They’ll call them a baby, a mommy’s boy or a daddy’s girl and make it seem like the love and need of the parent and the desire to stay close with them and forgive them for expectable mistakes or even large, serious mistakes is somehow a lack of character or strength.

Your kid can be in a situation where they really are married to or coupled with somebody who has a real psychological stranglehold on them where their natural desire to be close to you gets pathologized or painted as being something that’s sick, problematic, troubled, immature or undeveloped.
Most people are vulnerable. Unless they have a pretty darn healthy self-esteem they’re vulnerable to that kind of thing. There is no more hellish marriage than living with somebody who is that disturbed.

If your kid is married to somebody who has borderline personality disorder, paranoid personality disorder, anti-social personality, or even if they have such severe depression or anxiety that they can’t tolerate any disruption and their orientation is so much toward making themselves feel safe and not feeling anxious or upset, that may cause them to not want anybody in their midst that will create those feelings in them.

If somebody has that kind of a psychological profile, it doesn’t take a whole lot for that type of feelings to get triggered. Typically these people are not happy people. Happy people overall tend to be more tolerant,
forgiving and loving. It’s typically people who are more unhappy who are more reactive, difficult and disturbed.

People who are more troubled, particularly the diagnoses that I just mentioned, construct the world in such a way to make themselves feel safe. Often they do come from homes where they were more troubled or there was maybe abuse, instability or chaos. Not always, but often they do.

The way that they make themselves feel safe and comfortable is to quickly rid themselves of anyone who in any way challenges their perspective. Thus, the most insignificant interaction can cause that person to become self-righteous, preoccupied and inflamed.

I’ve heard statements like, “I can’t believe that your mother asked me if we’d started a college fund yet. What does she think, that I’m a neglectful mother?” or “I can’t stand
how uninvolved your parents are with our kids. They just sit there and barely play with them,” despite the fact the daughter-in-law has already complained every time the parents interact with the kids.

On the other hand, this diagnosis may sadly describe your child. He or she may have psychological issues even if they are well-parented, as we talked about in last week’s seminar, that make him or her unable to withstand the normal and expectable slings and arrows of adult life and family interaction.

They may be too sensitive, depressed, anxious, insecure or just too troubled to be able to handle the normal, expectable conflicts that happen in every single family. They may need to gang up with their spouse and their spouse’s family against you as a way to feel more insulated from the normal
conflicts that come from expectable parent-child interactions.

Their fragility may mean that they have to construct the world in an overly-simplistic fashion that, “People are either with me or against me.” This is why sometimes in estrangement the estranged child not only cuts off the parents but anyone related to the parents, even revered grandparents, siblings, aunts and uncles.

Why would this be the case?, It’s because their view of themselves is so fragile that they can’t tolerate anybody challenging it and saying, “Your mom or dad aren’t so bad. I remember them growing up. They’re good people. I don’t think you’re being fair to them. Give them another chance. What did they do that was so bad?”

There may also be other siblings who grew up in the same household and witnessed the
parents and can testify that the child’s orientation and perspective of the parents is very distorted and certainly isn’t a view that they share.

If you know my writing you know that I’m a believer in separate realities. It’s an important orientation for you to have. What’s confusing about this for most people is that often the people who are the most fragile can look the most strong.

Typically with the people who can look the most arrogant, aggressive and domineering, there’s often a great sense of fragility under that, or they wouldn’t need to display it in that way.

Often the people who are the most confident don’t have to walk around criticizing everybody else, devaluing them and showing their superiority. They have an inherent sense of their value.
What’s key to understand is your adult child’s ability to manage conflict with you. The avoidance of conflict is at the heart of parental estrangement, either conflict with the spouse or the parent they’ve estranged themselves from, or in the case of a divorce, with the other parent who may now have become the new best friend of the estranged child.

Conflict management is important because of this whole issue about identity and individuality. Prior to the 1960s there was much less of an emphasis on the importance of the self. In some cultures the idea of a self isn’t even an important thing.

In Asian societies, for example, group identity is far more important than individual identity. There was a study comparing Japanese and Americans. They showed a picture of a school of fish with one
fish separate from the school. They asked the viewers to tell a story about what was going on in the picture.

The Japanese said that the fish that was separate from the group felt lonely and isolated and had been rejected from the group or didn’t know how to fit in. They saw what we could call individuality as problematic.

The Americans looked at it and said, “That person is more creative. They’re more of an independent thinker. They have a stronger sense of self.”

In the field of psychology we make a big deal about separation, individuation and autonomy. These are the gold standards of adult development. The problem is that it puts the locus of control in terms of family relationships at the wrong place.
There isn’t really a value anymore of shared sacrifice, honor thy father and mother, if your parents sacrificed for you, sent you to a good school, gave you opportunities that nobody ever gave them, stayed in or got out of a bad marriage in order to protect you, raised you as a single parent or worked hard to make amends for whatever mistakes they did make.

There isn’t really any value anymore in our culture that compels the person who’s in the child’s role to say, “Those are reasonable things for me to do.” That’s no longer the value.

That was why in the first talk that I gave on the five most common mistakes I talked about how you can’t have your orientation being toward what’s fair. If you have your orientation toward what’s fair you’re not going to get anywhere.
There are new rules in town. The new rule is does the relationship make the adult child feel good or bad? If it makes them feel bad your risks of estrangement go up. If it makes the adult child feel good your risks of estrangement go down. It’s a fairly simplistic calculus that I’m giving but it’s more true than not.

Getting back to the daughter-in-law versus son-in-law, with sons-in-law what I often see is they can be more harsh, absolute, domineering and controlling and less sympathetic to the female adult child’s desire to stay close to the parents, empathize with the parent and want to take care of the parent.

With the daughter-in-law what I often see is that, because men are more conflict avoidant they may not have the will to fight to be
close to the parents if the daughter-in-law is against it.

For men, their wives are typically their best friends and in many cases their only friend. Therefore many men pay a higher price when their wives threaten to leave them or make their lives miserable if they stay close to the parents.

Daughters-in-law also may be closer or more aligned with their own mothers. This can provide a powerful, even sometimes cult-like alliance, as some of you have experienced. Men, especially those who are close to their moms, may not know any other way of creating a space.

For example, in divorce we know that the mother-son and father-daughter bonds are the ones that are most at risk for disruptions. Obviously this isn’t true in all cases since I
see plenty of cases where the daughter cuts
off mom after a divorce.

The final thing that I want to emphasize
before I move into strategies and take
questions is to talk about problems with
prior communication. Sometimes
estrangements get triggered when we open
our big mouths and say things that we
shouldn’t.

I think this is very tricky terrain, particularly
if you have your kid and you see that they’re
going to marry the wrong person or they’re
stepping into something that’s really a
problem where they’re going to get hurt.

These things are often a lot more obvious to
us than they are to our kids. Whether our kid
asks us or not, we may have voiced our
opinion about it and that may come back to
bite us later down the line.
Sometimes we end up saying things directly to that spouse or spouse-to-be that can put things on a bad path. In most cases if your kid is married to somebody healthy, reasonable and resilient they might say, “I didn’t really like it when you said that. Can you not do that? Can you not tell me how to parent?” or whatever.

You might not like it but you’d say, “I can go with that. Fair enough.”

That isn’t often what happens in these situations. What often happens is that the SIL or DIL doesn’t say anything. It goes underground. They start thinking about it and getting mad and upset. It becomes a wedge that you later end up paying for.

Let’s look for a bit at strategies.
I know how hopeless it feels and how helpless you feel when you’re going through a long-term estrangement. In reality they don’t always come back but a lot of them do.

All of these principles really matter. They’re important to think about and have at the front of your consciousness if you are wondering if there is a way for me to break through. Sometimes parents have given up prematurely or taken a position that locks the conflict into place rather than creating a channel where things can open up.

If it hasn’t become clear yet, your strategy first and foremost, if possible, is to find a way to make peace with your son or daughter-in-law. Nowhere is thinking about strategy rather than fairness more true than here.
A lot of you probably hate your son or daughter-in-law, or you feel furious at them. You feel appropriately enraged. If you have a son or daughter-in-law and it’s because of them that you no longer see your kid, most parents want to hire a hit man, tell that person off, or shove them up against a wall and take it out of their hide.

I completely understand that, but that’s not going to work or buy you anything. You can call up that person and rail against them and write them poisoned-pen letters if you want. That’s fine, but it’s not going to get your kid back.

You have to make peace with that person. Do you know why? Because they have a bomb strapped to them and your kid, and if there are grandkids involved, them too.

If there’s any opportunity to approach them, you have to approach them like they’re
standing there with the fuse in their hand. Your goal is to get them to put the fuse down so that they don’t just blow everything up.

That means if you have said things that were problematic, then you’ll need to make amends despite the fact that you probably don’t feel like making amends. It also means that you give them gifts on holidays equivalent to what you would give your child.

If they’ve clearly said that they don’t want contact or if your kid is sending back your gifts, you don’t have to do it in that situation. We’ll talk about that more next week. If they’re not sending the gifts back then you want to sweeten the pot.

You want to show them that you’re not a threat. For whatever reason, they think you’re a threat. They may be psychotic.
They may be out of their minds, but they have it in their heads that you’re a threat and they have to keep you at distance.

What you have to do is find all kinds of ways to prove to them that you’re not a threat and to show them that you’re walking into the room with your hands held out to show that you don’t have a gun or knife and you’re not going to hurt them.

I know that sounds ironic because you feel like they’re the ones brandishing the guns and knives, but that’s really important. Also find opportunities to praise or validate them as a spouse or parent.

You have to evaluate whether you have the stomach to do it. These are my ideas if you want to have a reconciliation or to see if a reconciliation is possible. They’re not what you should do to be a good person. They’re
just the things that have the highest probability of working.

I am going to move on to the question and answer phase. This week, unlike last week, I had people email me questions in advance so I could have more time to think about them and sort through the issues.

Here is a 21st century question. The author writes, “My future daughter-in-law will only communicate to me via email or text. Currently she will only communicate via text, yet she is not honest in this text communication. She cuts and pastes my texts so that the end result is a negative misrepresentation of what I said.” Isn’t that creative?

“Even though we have spoken honestly to her and my son in a friendly and non-threatening way about preferring the phone
or face-to-face whenever possible, she refuses any other form of communication.

“For example, she texted me the message that if I want to invite family guests to their upcoming August wedding, I must deliver a list to her by text or miss the opportunity to invite guests.

“My son is avoiding the issue. He phones me when he knows I’m at work and doesn’t pick up when I call him back. What next steps should I take?”

This is what I would call a pre-estrangement scenario. The son is in some kind of contact with her. The future daughter-in-law is in contact with her but she’s really goading this person into doing something which is going to justify her cutting the parents off.

She has already started by limiting the contact that the son has. She’s doing this
thing with the texts where she intentionally makes it seem like the mom is being critical.

Several things are important here. One is that there’s an upcoming August wedding. If this is a more troubled person, and I would argue that they are given this bizarre form of communication, they must have a lot of anxiety about the upcoming wedding.

People who are more troubled tend to have more anxiety about interactions. Most people are anxious about planning a wedding, but clearly she wants to limit the power and effect of the mother that sent the email.

My advice to you is do not fight her on this. What you have to do is really show her that she has the power and you’re not a threat. If there’s a wedding in the works, she’s probably going to be particularly watchful of
you to see if you’re going to let her call the shots.

Let her do it. Go out of your way to show appreciation. Tell her what a wonderful job she’s doing. If she says you have to send it in text, then send it in text. This girl is poised to estrange you at the drop of a hat. You are in dangerous territory. This is a clear pre-estrangement situation. You do not want to mess with this girl. She is poised to write you off the list.

She’s doing it in a very manipulative way, so don’t mess with it. You’re not going to win any points anywhere with debating or fighting her or saying you prefer phone calls. She doesn’t give a damn that you prefer a phone call. The fact that you prefer a phone call means she wants you to do everything by text.
If she does the thing of misinterpreting your email and cutting and pasting it so it distorts what you say or makes it seem wrong, then keep it positive. Write back and say, “I’m sorry. I don’t think I was very clear. I could see why you were confused. What I meant to say is this.”

She’s tempting you to fight with her. That’s the last thing that you want to do. She’s hoping you’ll fight with her so she can prove to your son what a terrible parent you are and why you shouldn’t be invited to the wedding or be a part of their lives.

I assume she is holding your son hostage until she’s assured that you’re not a threat. That may be a while. You’re going to have to be very careful and cautious until you don’t have to be. That may be well after the wedding. I would be very careful with this person.
The next question is, “A year ago we were discussing wedding plans with our son and future daughter-in-law when they said they were going out of the country to get married and would not be inviting anyone. I said, ‘We respect your decision, but if any of her family is invited then we would expect to be included also.’

“After they left my son called me crying hysterically and told me to never contact him again. I’ve mentioned to him that I was following his request until he told me differently. Am I responding correctly by not contacting him?”

A. I would say since this came out of the blue and you were in contact up to that point, I wouldn’t respect that request initially. I would pursue it. It’s not completely clear what his objection was to.
It sounds like his objection was that you have the gall to say that if they’re going to invite her parents, then you would want to be invited too. I can see why you would say that. I could imagine myself saying that. It seems like a reasonable thing to say.

My guess is that they probably were inviting her parents and A) she took it out on him in some kind of way or B) he has a lot of fragility around his autonomy, so the fact that you’re making any demands around “his” wedding makes you persona non grata.

I would try to reach out to him. I would make it clear that you weren’t trying to be controlling or pushy but you guess it came across that way. Make it clear that you love him and want to be close to him. Say, “This is something that could be worked out.” Don’t say “should” because that’s a demand.
In general, in the early period of an estrangement, you don’t want to take it at face value unless the kid just gets inflated when you try to reach out. What happens with a lot of parents is that they feel they’re damned if they do, damned if they don’t. If they pursue the kid, they may get accused of stalking them. If they don’t, then they get accused of neglecting them.

I know how this sounds because I work with a lot of adult children. I can sort of hear how it sounds in my office. If the parent isn’t chasing them, they’ll say, “They don’t really care.” If they are pursuing them, then the parent gets accused of either being not sincere or of not giving them their space.

Since estrangement in the early part is the lodging of a complaint, I don’t think you want to accept a kid saying, “Don’t ever contact me again,” until it’s really clear what
it’s about and what they’re up to. I don’t think we really know yet what they’re up to.

The next question is, “Do you believe that situations exist in which the more frequently or intensely the cut off parent makes attempts to communicate, the more that could somehow be interpreted as empowering and feeding the estrangement? What could possibly be an indicator that this could be the case?”

A. I’m really glad you asked this question because I think a lot of parents struggle with this issue. “Am I enabling the kid by making amends, reaching out and taking the hit and taking the high road?”

In general I think you have to start out by making sure you’ve done your due diligence on making amends. A parent needs to do all that for a considerable period of time. It can’t be a couple of conversations. It’s often
a matter of months to a year or more. Sometimes it’s a few years.

In the case with my daughter it was probably several years and many conversations where I reiterated my trying to make amends, my perspective and my empathy for her.

Sometimes that is the wrong thing because it can make the kid feel like they have a bigger gripe against us than they really deserve to have. They can get confused by our guilt. That’s why I think it’s useful to try to make amends for a while so in your own mind you can check that box and in your conservations with your kid you can check that box.

If they’re still wielding this over you after a period of time, let’s say a year or two, and you feel like you’ve done a good job of making amends and have been very diligent, serious and steadfast in the way that I
encourage people to do in my book, you should work to forgive yourself for whatever mistakes you’ve made and consider continuing to reach out but in a more upbeat way, and less focused on amends, per se.

It’s reasonable in your own mind and heart to feel like the kid should do the same for you but I would never have the conversation be, “You should forgive me,” or “You should end this,” but I might pull back if my efforts were only increasing the child’s aggression or blame.

I need to write more about this because I didn’t really write enough about this in my book. I think there is a healthy place for a parent to say, “Okay, I’m going to stop trying now.” This isn’t what you would say. I’ll tell you what you would say in a second.

You really create a vacuum and let them miss you. We’re all so miserable going
through an estrangement. We’re so desperate and willing to jump through any kind of hoop. Most parents are, though not all. Part of the problem with us being pushier in our desires to connect and heal is that it could give the kid the idea that they have a bigger claim against their parent than they really have.

Kids don’t always know. If you act guilt ridden about it, then the kid actually feels like, “Oh, I guess I do have a complaint here.” They start flailing about, trying to get their way. In some ways, they take their cues from us. Both our courage to face our mistakes and our clarity about the depth of them or lack thereof.

A lot of kids today don’t have a very good idea of what’s reasonable to complain about and what isn’t and what’s reasonable to blame the parent for and what isn’t.
I do think it sometimes is therapeutic to let your child blame you, particularly if their life hasn’t turned out very well. If they’re an adult who never really got off the ground and feels very defective, sometimes it’s therapeutic for the parent to say, “It’s partly my fault. I could have done more. I should have done more.” It helps the kid take the blame off themselves and free up more energy generated by the optimism that that can create..

However, if your kid just keeps being abusive, difficult and mean and acts like you did something terrible when you know in your heart you didn’t, at some point it’s reasonable to say, “I’m dropping the reins here. Let’s see where the horse goes.”

My experience in working with estranged adult children is that most of them do still love their parents and care about them, even
when they’re behaving terribly toward them. If you’re trying so hard, it may mean that they may not have to miss you. There is some wisdom to the saying, “How can I miss you if you’re always here?”

If we’re trying so hard for so long, then the kid may not have to really deal with the recognition that, “I haven’t heard from Mom or Dad for six months. I wonder what that means. They haven’t sent me a gift. I wonder what that means.”

It’s a crucially important question and something that I’m going to talk more about going forward because I think it’s very confusing for parents to find out where that line is and to know when enough is enough.

If you are going to take that stance, then you want to do it in a non-martyred way. You don’t want to do it like, “I’ve tried everything and nothing I do works with
you.” You want to do it in a more proud way.

If you’re writing an email, perhaps you say, “I feel like I have been trying really hard to make amends with you over the past year or two. I do think you have legitimate complaints, and that’s why I’ve been reaching out to you. I just want you to know the door is always open, but I’m going to respect your desire for less contact. It seems to me that contact doesn’t seem that useful, so I’m going to pull back.”

You could also experiment with not doing anything and giving your kid six months to a year where you just completely drop the reins. You don’t call, write or send them birthday gifts if this has been something that you’ve been pretty reliable about. We’ll talk about whether or not you send your grandkids gifts if there are grandchildren.
You completely just drop it and see what they do. If you’ve been pursuing it and doing all the amends and that hasn’t worked, there could be a place for that.

The next question is, “My ex and I were married for 30 years, and he’s in Mensa.” Mensa, for those of you who don’t know, is an organization you can only get into if you have a very high IQ.

“He was a member of Mensa, and he had a very controlling, manipulative and alcoholic disposition. Both of my kids have spouses with very similar traits, and both are now estranged from me. Why couldn’t they find someone happy and loving, you know, just a little normal? I believe Mother Teresa, the all-knowing saint of saints, would find this perplexing as well.”

A. Fair enough. Children do sometimes choose to either be more close to or more
alike the more troubled or more difficult parent. That is a subject that’s very confusing for the healthier parent, which in many cases is the estranged parent.

It’s very confusing for the estranged parent when they know that they’re the one who is healthier and actually gave more to the kids, was more dedicated and actually helped launched the kids into adulthood.

Sometimes people take on the worst part of their parents as a way to be close to them. That may be especially true of parents who were less involved when the children were younger.

In other words, they’re being like that parent as a way to have some piece of them and internalize them. Therefore, marrying people like that parent or becoming like that parent is a way to get something from them that they couldn’t otherwise get.
In addition, kicking you, the estranged parent, to the curb sweetens the deal with the other parent who may have been less involved and less available.

It’s a way to say, “Mom’s bad and you’re good.” It’s like bringing your head on a platter to the other parent as a way to cement the deal. It’s very hard on parents who have been the more dedicated parent and they’re the one who later gets estranged.

The next question is, “Is there any psychological basis for this need/desire of the estranged adult child to orchestrate such a war against the parent using the spouse, son-in-law or daughter-in-law to wage war against the parent as well?

“In some cases this is extremely perplexing because the son-in-law or daughter-in-law and their families barely even know the
estranged parent, yet they all act like mortal enemies toward the cut-off parents.

“In other words, even if one could understand the estrangement between the parent and child, why is it necessary to gather up so many other unrelated people to be soldiers? Is it for credibility purposes? Is it to make the punishment that much harsher? Is it to ensure that no one will be sympathetic to the parents who want to see their grandchildren?”

A. This is a really important question. It goes back to my point earlier about the issue of psychological fragility. If I’m a strong and healthy person and you do something I don’t like, I don’t really need anybody else to prove that I’m right.

Sometimes in my work with couples, one person will challenge the other person and say, “All my friends think the same thing
about you,” or “I noticed when we’re out that even the waiter responds negatively to you in that way.” That’s coming from a more fragile place.

The reality is that if you think it, you don’t need to line up an army of people behind you to validate it. You know it’s true because you’re a strong enough person. You trust your perceptions.

The fact that somebody has to get a whole posse together of not only the son-in-law and daughter-in-law, but their family members and friends to prove what a terrible, awful person you are speaks to the fragility of your kid or to the person that they are married to.

They should be able to just come to you with a complaint and say, “This is what bugs the crap out of me. You need to change this so we can have a good relationship,” or “We
need to work on this,” or “I’m still mad about that.” That’s what a healthy person does.

People who have a much more fragile orientation toward the world need a lot more justification. They need other people to prove that they’re right and say, “Yes, you’re right. That person is terrible.”

This fragility is what causes people to really exaggerate the so-called crimes that their parents committed, to call them narcissists, borderlines or abusive when other people who would objectively look at the family, or the person would say that that’s not the case.

Importantly and subtly, it’s also a way to deal with the guilt that they unconsciously feel. I’d say the vast majority of estranged adult children do feel some guilt about the fact that they’ve cut off their parent. That
guilt may mean that they have to justify it more to themselves and other people.

They have to say, “They did something so terrible. They were so awful, abusive, difficult and whatever. They ruined my life.” They don’t feel like they’re going to get much support if they just say, “I didn’t really like this part of their personality,” or “When I’m around them, they act a little more critical than I like.”

A lot of the time our kid’s complaints about us are valid, but they don’t have to pull together a posse, committee or consensus of other people to stand behind them and say, “Yes, that person is right. This parent is a terrible person.”

The next question is, “My 39-year-old daughter has been estranged from me for over 10 months now. I know it’s not near as long as other’s relationships. However, my
husband and I are considering redoing our wills and omitting her. I keep praying for a miracle. Is taking her out of our will wrong even if she never wants to have anything else to do with us?”

A. I have several thought about this question. I get a lot of questions from parents about whether they should take their kids out of the will.

My first thought is that 10 months is considered an early estrangement from my perspective. If it’s basically for a month to two years, that’s a relatively early estrangement. Not quite enough time has passed to know that this isn’t reparable. And that doesn’t mean that longer ones are hopeless since I often get letters from parents with longer estrangements who have recently reconciled.
So, in your case, unless she has clearly said, “I’m going to send the police if you contact me,” or sent out a restraining order or gets super aggressive whenever you contact her in general, I’d encourage you to keep reaching out at this point.

The other is this whole issue of wills, which I think is really important. On the one hand, I work with so many estranged parents who have been treated miserably by their children. The children are contemptuous, cruel, harsh, humiliating and have broken their parents’ hearts. Their parents have felt suicidal and hopeless. They can’t get up in the morning and have lost meaning.

Let me start by saying I don’t blame any parent who cuts a kid out of a will. If you want to cut your kid out of your will, you have my complete sympathy and support, so
I wouldn’t want any parent to feel guilty about it.

With that said, I think there is a case to be made for not cutting your kid out of a will. That case goes like this: Until our kids die, we’re still parents. We still operate in their minds. I think you actually make a stronger statement to your kid about who you were as a human being by not cutting your kid out of your will.

If you want to make a strong statement that your kid was wrong about you and you want them to get more reconnected with all the ways you were a good parent and a good person, I can’t think of any stronger way than to surprise a kid by not having cut them out of the will.

Unless your kid is a complete sociopath, meaning they have absolutely no guilt or ability to empathize at all, and I’m sure you
may feel at this point that they don’t, I guarantee that leaving them in will cause some serious self-reflection. It will be much harder after your death for them to look at you in the same critical way that they treated you when you were alive. And you can use your will to say something profound.

Just to repeat, you have 100% of my support if you want to do cut them out. I don’t blame any parent for doing it. I completely sympathize with it. I wouldn’t want any parent to feel guilty about not doing it, but I would also invite you to think about this other perspective of the fact that we’re still our kid’s parents until our kids die.

Last question:
“My 21-year-old son cut off all contact with my ex-husband and myself a year ago when he moved in with his borderline personality disordered girlfriend. I’ll be getting remarried soon and be moving to a smaller place where we won’t be able to store his things, including a baby grand piano.

“Should I write to tell him of the marriage and ask what he wants me to do with his belongings, or should I disperse of his things without asking his permission and let him learn about the marriage through the family grapevine?”

A. You should definitely tell him about the marriage. This is one of these things where you’re damned if you do, damned if you don’t. If you contact him, he may be mad at you for contacting him. If you don’t, then he’ll hold it against you for the rest of your
life saying, “You got married and didn’t even tell me.”

These estranged children don’t always think through the logic of their position where the parent ends up feeling, “On the one hand, you told me you don’t want me to have any contact with you. If I don’t contact you, then you act like I’m being neglectful.” Overall it’s better to err on the side of not being neglectful.

Let them reject you in that sense, bearing in mind what I said earlier. Sometimes you do have to drop the reins. But you should not give away his things without telling him. It’s too aggressive. It’s understandable, but it’s something that he could reasonably hold against you, and it’s not worth it to you to do it.

Since this does force him to contact you, you could use it as an opening. You could
say, “We’re going to be moving, and I want to know what you wanted me to do with your things, like your baby grand. I also would like to see you. If you’re going to get the things, I would like for you and I to have a meeting. It can be short and sweet.”

The kid is only 21. It isn’t that you shouldn’t take the estrangement seriously, but they’re babies at 21. Sometimes they’re just flailing about when they say they don’t want any contact with a parent. At that age, it may be relatively brief.

You don’t want to put any stakes in the ground that drive the estrangement further into the ground. Your orientation needs to be that you’re going to keep the channels of communication clear and that the door is going to be open.

You don’t want to meet fire with fire, as we talked about last time. Giving away his
things and not telling him you’re going to get married is an example of meeting fire with fire.

Q. As a parent with an estranged son and daughter-in-law, I feel like you wrote your introduction to the upcoming seminar for me personally. It sounds just like our situation.

It has been 2 1/2 years since my son told us off on the phone on Christmas Eve (after they got home) because he and his wife thought the gifts we gave our 4-year-old granddaughter were too young for her. My husband and I were speechless. Accusations went back and forth for about a year, and there is no communication now. I sent my son a nice card a month ago, and he returned it unopened. I have called him two times in the last year, and asked if we could see the girls, and he said he would talk to his wife and call me back. He never called me back.

We went to our psychologist for about a year, but he said there wasn't much we could do at this point.

Anyway, my question is: Should we keep sending presents to our 2 granddaughters (now ages 7 and 9) even though we don't get a response or a thank you?

We don't send any more gifts to my son and daughter-in-law, and they don't send anything to us.

Do you think there is ever going to be reconciliation? Will I ever see my son again? We always were so close until this happened. His wife is very domineering and she told him it
was her or us!! He said this in an email to my daughter. He had to make a choice!

A. I guess it’s a sign of the times that an adult child feels like he has the right to yell at his parents because he thinks the gifts that were given were too young for his child. This is a classic case of the child feeling like they have to choose between the parents and the spouse. Since he said he would talk to his wife and see, I would continue to reach out by phone and see if you can make any headway in that way. In general, parents should pursue whatever avenue of entry has worked in past, so if he has taken your call, then perhaps phone is the best method. I would empathize with him about his dilemma, let him know you don’t want him to be in the middle and ask if there’s anything you can do to reach out to his wife. If you haven’t yet written some kind of letter of appeasement to the wife, I would do that too. Something like “We must have hurt you very badly for you not to want to see us. We are so sorry and really do want a closer relationship with you…”

Q. The parents of the daughter-in-law (who are estranged from their other child) don't want to "share" and put maybe put pressure on her to be loyal. How best to deal with this?

A. Your main weapon is to kill them with kindness. If they’re the suspicious types, you’re better off erring on the side of being good-naturedly consistent and
kindness than pulling back too far and letting them paint you as bad guys.

Q. How to deal with a DIL who has a background in psychology? Analyzing my behavior as a mother raising our son. DIL does not want any relationship with me or my husband. Our son totally agrees with her and totally believes everything she has to say and never see any of her bad behaviors towards us.

A. You can’t completely refute it or you’ll look too defensive. Ideally, you’d see if there’s any kernel of truth to what she said. The main thing is to not get angry or defensive because that is not a battle you’re going to win. Be curious and interested in what the observations are. Now, if you’re being accused of child abuse or something really terrible you have to say, “I can tell you with 100 percent confidence that never, ever happened. That’s not something that I did to you nor was I capable of doing that to a child.”

Q. Where is the line that enough is enough???? Enough of the emotional/psychological/ and spiritual abuse by a DIL who has complete control over my only child/my son. After years of abuse from both/each of them. Entering therapy 5 yrs. ago, I decided to walk away from my only child, and my only biological twin granddaughters. When is enough enough????
A. You get to decide. It certainly sounds like you’ve tried for a long time. My checklist for parents in a general way is:

a. Did you write a letter of amends?
b. Did you reach out for at least or year or 2?
c. Did you try to reach out to the DIL or SIL?
d. Are you paying too big of a price to keep trying?

Q. I have a difficult daughter in law to be and I am trying to prevent an estrangement with my son (her fiancé). Our relationship has been very strained because she has done a revisionist job on his childhood and convinced my son that I was not a good mother. Would the same advice apply with an engaged couple and an estrangement that appears to be imminent?

A. Yes, (interesting that this is similar to the earlier question). Clearly she is motivated to pull your son away from you so you will need to step very carefully. Be sure to include her in correspondence, give her gifts on her birthdays and holidays, praise her, never criticize her, act like you like her even if you don’t!

See you next week!